

February 27, 2023
Akimi Palitz Nelken
NHFT 933

In Support of:

House Bill 5673: AN ACT CONCERNING THE REFORMATION OF CERTAIN
TAXES AND TAX EQUITY.

Good afternoon Senator Fonfara, Representative Horn, and the distinguished members of the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee:

My name is Akimi Nelken and I live in Branford.

I'm a member of the New Haven Federation of Teachers– I am an English teacher at Wilbur Cross High School.

I am testifying in strong support of House Bill 5673: An Act Concerning The Reformation Of Certain Taxes And Tax Equity. As the wealthiest state in the country, Connecticut should be a shining example for the nation where every family has what we need to live a good life. But instead we have a state where hundreds of thousands of working people are struggling to raise families, even while a handful of wealthy corporations and wealthy residents are getting even wealthier. The scale of this crisis demands a bold response—people are suffering and our state has a responsibility, and has the resources to enact policies that provide for Connecticut families.

I grew up in a wealthy suburban town in California. Our school district was the second highest performing district in the state at the time that I was in school there. California, however, was in a budget crisis and schools statewide extremely underfunded. How was my school able to pay for extensive arts education, sports renovations, adequate staffing that allowed for smaller class sizes and more course offerings etc.? Through voluntary bond measures and other fundraising efforts– essentially, a voluntary tax on the community. But this voluntary tax only benefitted the already wealthy members of our community; our neighbors in nearby Oakland and Richmond struggled to provide even a basic level of education to their students because they were so severely underfunded. The voluntary bond measures and other fundraising efforts were not possible there, and those communities suffered because of it.

This same inequity exists in Connecticut. As I am sure you have heard countless times today alone, Connecticut has one of the largest wealth gaps in the country. We do not have to replicate what I experienced in California– a society where only those who can afford to pay receive a quality education and other basic human rights such as decent housing and safe neighborhoods. We have the tax base in our state to ensure that all people, regardless of income, are educated in the best possible schools. House Bill 6573 will enable our state to raise the bar for everyone.

The students and teachers in New Haven are incredible— we are diverse, bright, principled, hardworking, and creative. We represent the best of what the future has to offer. But we are struggling as individuals and as a society. Nearly all of my students get jobs when they turn 16, many of them working 40-50 hours per week in addition to going to school full time in order to support their families. How can they be expected to perform at the same level as students in wealthier districts, who do not have to bear these financial burdens? My classroom floods with inches of standing water every year, and many of our facilities, technology and materials are woefully inadequate to educate students in today's world. Additionally, many of our teachers have left to teach in higher paying suburbs, or take on second jobs in order to afford working in one of the lowest paid districts in the state. The teacher shortage has drastic implications for the quality of education we are able to provide our students, and this shortage does not exist in places where public schools are fully funded. I truly believe that both children and adults in my community are giving as much as they can; one cannot pour from an empty cup. Increased investment from the state would make a dramatic difference for us. Financial relief for families and increased funding for social services would breathe fresh air into our community and bring us back to life. Rather than continuing to perpetuate this cycle where the rich get richer and the poor struggle to survive, we have the opportunity to build a very different reality in Connecticut.

Collectively, we have the resources to create a state where everyone is taken care of— where everyone has what they need to thrive. I urge the Committee to have the courage to make the right choice and pass House Bill 5673: An Act Concerning The Reformation Of Certain Taxes And Tax Equity.

Thank you,

Akimi Palitz Nelken
Branford, CT